



# LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE IN KAZAKHSTAN: PUBLIC SIGNS IN ASTANA

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the usage of Kazakh, Russian and English in public space in the city of Astana, the capital of the Republic of Kazakhstan. We show how and to what extent these languages have been implemented in written texts such as names of shops and institutes.

**KEYWORDS:** language policy, multilingualism, urban places, written texts.

## 1. Introduction

Kazakhstan was one of the few former republics of the Soviet Union facing the problem to make its own language to be the prevailing one. There were no Kazakh schools, Kazakh children studied in Russian language schools; there was no requirement to teach Kazakh (Kulzhanova, 2012).

Within a historically short period after gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan has managed to take a strong position on the international scene. Kazakhstan became a member state of the United Nations and other international organizations. Since then, Kazakhstan has been actively involved in the activities of many UN organizations, such as UNESCO, UNICEF, ECOSOC, UNHCR, to name but a few. Kazakhstan also began to collaborate with a number of major international organizations, eg. the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). It was an initiator of the convening of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Asian analog of the OSCE. And it is actively involved in the integration processes within the framework of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Central Asian Economic Union (CAPS), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Kazakhstan became the first Asian country to chair the OSCE.

Thus, in view of the political and economic internationalization, the command of English became more and more important. For this, since Kazakhstan announced its independence, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has constantly been advocating a trilingual model: Each citizen of Kazakhstan should strive to gain fluency in English, Russian, and Kazakh. Accordingly, the national project 'Trinity of languages' determines Kazakh as the state language, Russian as an official language, and English as the language of international communication (Nazarbayev, 2007). At once, this trinity is understood as harmony rather than competition.

As a consequence, it is important to accompany as well as to support the implementation of that trinity by scientific explorations. That trinity needs to be related to the multicultural policy, which requires the knowledge of the native language and also stimulates the learning of other languages.

This paper presents the usage of these three languages in the public space of the city of Astana as an example for the current language usage in Kazakhstan. It relies on two kinds of materials: (i), a survey of street signs, names of sites, buildings, places or institutions, and, (ii), a comparative analysis of language usage. All of them constitute the linguistic landscape of a place. For this, a multi-level observation on a sound theoretical and methodical basis is necessary.

Our investigation of the linguistic landscape of Astana bases on similar surveys for Milan (Ross, 1997), Zurich and Uppsala (Mc Artur, 2000), three smaller central-European cities (Schlik, 2002), Tokyo (MacGregor, 2003) as well as for cities in Portugal (Stewart & Fawcett, 2004) and Thailand (Smalley, 1994). The basic goal of those surveys was to show, how the language of signs reflects the growing prominence of English in non-English countries. They all confirm the general impression, that English is the actual lingua franca and that English terms penetrate more and more into other languages.

## 2. National language policy in Kazakhstan

During the Soviet era, all of the Soviet Republics were required to use Russian as their first language. After the collapse of the USSR, all new, independent states switched to their native languages, were the transition made many non-natives to struggle and even to migrate. In Kazakhstan, Russian was kept as "the language of international communication" (Isaeva, Sultaniarova, 2013). Russian continues to perform important social and humanitarian functions, so that the purposeful replacement of Russian by Kazakh is still in progress. President Nazarbayev announced, "We must not declare that we would only develop our language, our culture. We must keep up with the times." (Nazarbayev, 2014). He assured the people that the transition will be step-by-step and prudent. "A gradual development of the Kazakh language will not be at the expense of Russian." (Nazarbayev, 2012).

Thus, Kazakh and Russian are the working languages at all educational institutions at all levels. Kazakh is the native language of instruction in schools, colleges and higher institutions. Moreover, Kazakh language is taught as an official language in all educational institutions, regardless of the language of teaching (Fierman, 2006). Russian language is taught as a native language in educational institutions with Russian language teaching and as compulsory subject in all educational institutions.

The tri-lingual education program Kazakh, Russian, and English—has been implemented on a pilot basis in special schools for gifted children since 2007. It involves in-depth studies of the teaching of humanities and mathematics cycles in English. Currently, there are 33 primary schools with tri-lingual teaching.

The number of secondary schools specializing in multi-lingual education is steadily growing, from 67 in 2011–2012 to 90 in 2012–2013. Among them there are 29 Kazakh-Turkish schools, 11 Nazarbayev Intellectual Schools and 33 other schools for gifted children. The number of pupils in these schools amounts to 20,461.

In order to develop multilingual education in Kazakhstan further, a special gradual action plan—to be completed till September 2016—was developed by the Ministry of Education and Science. English shall be taught in all comprehensive schools from the first grade on, beginning in 2013–2014.

Of course, the effectiveness of multi-lingual education depends immediately on the skills and proficiency of the teachers. In order to develop those, trainings abroad are organized, international scholars are attracted, the newest pedagogical methods are adopted and interactive telecommunication technics is acquired.

Since 2005, several official programs were developed, namely, the State Program of Education Development for 2005–2010, the State Program of Technical and Vocational Education Development for 2008–2012, “Children of Kazakhstan” for 2007–2011, “Balapan” (pre-school education) for 2010–2014, “Bolashak” (international scholarship). The State Program of Education Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2011–2020 is the organizational basis for the implementation of multi-lingual education. The program “Bolashak” is perhaps of the most interesting, promising, and potentially enduring developments for the multi-lingual education in Kazakhstan in the last decades. The participation of teachers in it has clearly opened new possibilities for the practice of multi-lingual education.

Due to these programs, the number of English speaking teachers is significantly increasing. To date, more than 20,000 Kazakhstani citizens have studied abroad. Around 3000 recipients of the Bolashak International Scholarship of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan are studying in 27 countries of the world.

Since September 1, 2012, multi-lingual departments with altogether more than 5000 students have been opened in 32 higher education institutions. Other higher education institutions have founded Centers for Multi-lingual Education. These centers

- create normative and educational-methodological aids,
- elaborate precise programs for multi-lingual education,
- give lectures and conduct practical classes in multi-lingual groups,
- organize gradual introduction to multi-lingual education in special subjects of science, engineering and humanities,
- improve the professional skills and proficiency of the teaching staff.

Many Kazakhstani universities started new projects for multi-lingual education.

### 3. Linguistic landscape of the city Astana

The city of Astana is located in central Kazakhstan on the Ishim River in a very flat, semi-arid steppe region that covers most of the country's territory. Astana is subdivided into three districts. Almaty District was created on 6 May 1998 by presidential decree. The district's territory encompasses an area of 21,054 hectares (52,030 acres; 81.29 square miles) with a population of 375,938 people. Yesil District was created on 5 August 2008 by presidential decree. The district's territory encompasses an area of 31,179 hectares (77,040 acres; 120.38 square miles) with a population of 119,929 people. Saryarka District was created on 6 May 1998 by presidential decree. The district's territory encompasses an area of 19,202 hectares (47,450 acres; 74.14 square miles) with a population of 339,286 people.

Astana is a planned city, such as Brasilia in Brazil, Canberra in Australia and Washington, D.C., in the United States. The master plan of Astana was designed by the Japanese architect Kisho Kurokawa (The Guardian, 2010).

The official language is Kazakh. The Language policy of Kazakhstan strongly supports Kazakh to become the prevailing general language of communication. At once, Russian is supported to hold a fairly stable position, in order to support the communication within the Custom Union with Russia and Belarus as well as within the Eurasian Economic Union. Additionally, the broad command of English is considered to be necessary for the sake of the successful integration into the global economy and science.

In this study, we have analyzed the linguistic landscape of Astana to demonstrate preferences of its citizens and to examine, to which extent the national project “Trinity of Languages” has currently been implemented. Following Gorter (Gorter, 2006), we have explored the use of different languages in public places of the three districts of Astana. The ‘Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Languages’ states,

“Traditional, historically formed Kazakh names of inhabited localities, streets, squares, as well as of other physic-geographical objects should be reproduced in other languages in compliance with transliteration rules. Names of state organizations, structural subdivisions thereof shall be given in the state and the Russian languages. Names of joint ventures, foreign organizations should be given with transliteration in both the state and the Russian languages.” (Ch. 4, Art. 19)

“Forms, signboards, advertisements, advertising, price lists and other visual information shall be set forth in the state and the Russian languages and, if required, in other languages too. ...All texts of visual information shall be placed in the following order: from the left or the top - in the state language, from the right or the bottom - in the Russian language and shall be written in the equal in size letters. If required, the texts of visual information may be given additionally in other languages. In this case the type size should not exceed the requirements specified by normative legal acts.” (Ch. 4, Art. 21)

The names of the three districts of Astana: Almaty, Yesil, Saryarka, harmoniously combine with the rich heritage of the past and as well as with the modern achievements. The districts Almaty and Saryarka were created in 1998 by presidential decree. Their territories encompass an area of about 20,000 hectare (50,000 acres; 88 square miles) and host about 300,000 habitants each. The younger Yesil District was created in 2008 by presidential decree. Its territory encompasses an area of about 30,000 hectare (77,000 acres; 120.00 square miles) with a population of approximately 180,000 people.

### 4. Research methodology

Our study was conducted in autumn 2015. It examines the use of Kazakh, Russian and English languages in the main streets of the three districts of Astana: Almaty, Saryarka, and Yesil. We focused on the visual presence of Kazakh, Russian and English. All words were grouped as follows: shops, internet clubs, beauty parlors, restaurants, fitness clubs, health centers, tourism agencies.

### 5. Quantitative results

#### 5.1. Distribution of Kazakh, Russian and English

A total of 517 names were listed, among them 172 in Almaty, 242 in Saryarka, 103 in Yesil). 180 of them are Kazakh, 175 are Russian, 162 are English, see Figure 1.

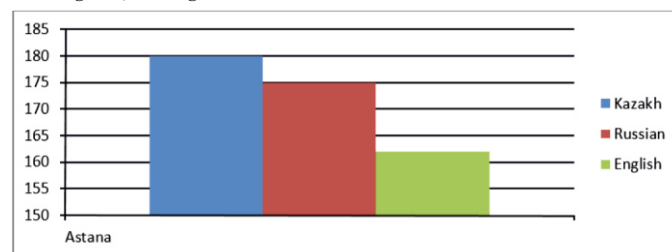


Figure 1. Share of Kazakh, Russian and English in public places in Astana

There is no significant difference between the occurrence of Kazakh (34.8 %), Russian (33.9 %) and English (31.3 %). The broad usage of English is due to several reasons.

- Foreign owners,
- to attract tourists not knowing Kyrillic letters,
- to appear modern,
- to exploit the particular ability of English to build laconic expressions.

The latter two reasons are observed in Germany as well.

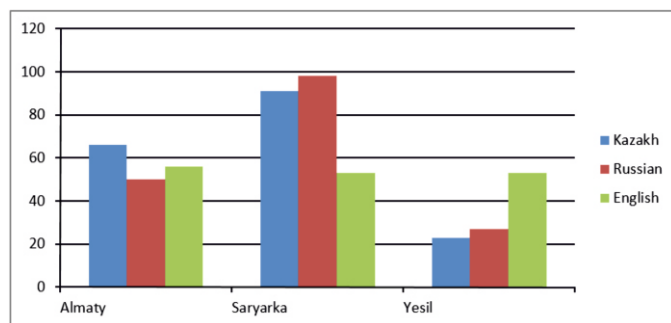
According to Zakon.kz, before Astana became the capital of Kazakhstan in 1997, only 180 out of 619 streets had names being associated with the history of Kazakhstan. More than 400 streets were named during the Soviet period. The restoration of old buildings and the construction of new ones within shortest time led to a radical change in the infrastructure of the capital, affecting not only the appearance of the city, but also the names within it. When the capital expanded, suburban villages were incorporated. As a consequence, many street names occurred multiply. After the declaration of independence in 1991, many streets changed from Russian to Kazakh ones. This has surely supported the increase of Kazakh names at

buildings, but had obviously no influence on the usage of English names.

Not surprisingly, there are significant differences in language usage between the three districts, see Table 1 and Figure 2.

**Table 1. Frequencies of language use in the three districts of Astana**

Language	Frequency	%
Almaty		
Kazakh	66	38.3
Russian	50	29.2
English	56	32.5
Saryarka		
Kazakh	91	37.6
Russian	98	40.5
English	53	21.9
Yesil		
Kazakh	23	22.3
Russian	27	26.2
English	53	51.5



**Figure 2. Frequencies of language use in the three districts of Astana according to Table 1**

In the Almaty district, the three languages are approximately equally present. But the share of Kazakh is clearly higher when compared with Saryarka and much higher when compared with Yesil. The main reason of this prevalence is the fact, that its area is the oldest one, while that of Yesil is the youngest one. Business owners prefer Kazakh names in Almaty, Russian names in Saryarka and English names in Yesil. Altogether, the national project “Trinity of Languages” seems to be well realized.

### 5.2. Multilingual signage

The method of multilingual signage (Reh, 2004) considers three types of language use in names:

1<sup>st</sup> Duplicating names: one and the same information in presented in two (or more) languages;

2<sup>nd</sup> Fragmentary names: the full information is given in one language only;

3<sup>rd</sup> Complementary names: the name is presented through using words of different languages.

Our results are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2. Language use per name type in Astana**

Name type	Kazakh	Russian	English	Sum
Duplicating	56	43	65	164
Fragmentary	77	80	60	217
Complementary	47	52	37	136
Total	180	175	162	517

### 5.3. Most commonly used words

Studying the national Language policy of Kazakhstan, linguistic landscape of the city Astana, we identified the amount of duplicating, fragmentary and complementary names in Kazakh, Russian, and English. Moreover we determined their appearance in different social places, as official buildings, shops, restaurants, beauty parlours, and so on. In most of these cases the three languages are organized in frag-

mentary names. The full information is given only in one language. In Kazakh language: Birlik (unity), Satti (Lucky), Tumar (talisman), Sandi (beautiful), Akku (swan), Tan (morning), Kunshygis (daylight), Zhibek zholy (Silk road), Altyn adam (gold man), Dos (friend), Arzan (cheap), Mereke (holiday), Konzhyk (rabbit), Nazik (tender) etc. Russian: Ujut (coziness), Tri tolstiaka (three fatties), Neznakomka (unfamiliar), Bashmachok (boot), Vzgliad (sight). English: Desire, Sweets, Curves, Kiss, Nail, Paradise etc.

### 5.4. Correlations between language use and sectors

Duplicating names are predominant in the health sector and for internet clubs, for example: Vitamin, Smack, Billiard, Cacao, Euro, Mummy, Technology, Class, Pulse, Faculty, Station, Doctor, Club, Mandarin, Spa, Arena, Studio, Bar & Grill, Moment, Solo, Elite, Park.

- Fragmentary names are prevalent for shops, internet clubs, beauty parlors, restaurants, fitness clubs, health centers and tourism agencies, for example: Vernyie druzya (Loyal friends), Strekoza (dragon-fly), Skazka (tale), Lozhka & vilka (spoon & fork), Tsvetnaya (colorful), Khod konya (way of knight), Pidzhak (suit), Vkysnyi dom (Sweet house), Izuminka (flavor), Astana na sviaz (Astana connection), Dobrota (kindness), Koketka (flirt), Vse dlia vseh (everything for everybody).

- Complementary names are met in private shops and business centers, for example: Sky Luxe Hotel, Lady Fleur, Archimedes Kazakhstan, Maxi Market, Dostar Med A, Teameat.kz, Applephone.kz, ShamBala, Zmedia, @li\_com, Grand GYM, Kaz Gor.

### 6. Conclusions

The Kazakhstan state language policy aims at an increase of the use of all three languages: Kazakh, Russian, and English. Russian and English are of special importance for visitors and migrants.

Our investigation of the linguistic landscape of the city of Astana reveals that that aim, the national project 'Trinity of Languages', is being completely implemented. The Kazakh language is increasingly used for the naming of shops and institutions, while Russian and English are preferred by private entrepreneurs.

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